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C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 007193

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TAGS: [KJUS](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [CO](#)
SUBJECT: PRE-ELECTIONS CLIMATE IN SUCRE: NEW SPACE
EMERGING, OLD CHALLENGES PERSIST

Classified By: Polcouns John Creamer.
Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (U) Politicians, local authorities, and victims groups in Sucre report the paramilitary demobilization has opened new political space, allowing increased participation by new political parties and social groups ahead of the October elections. Still, some victims, groups and candidates complain of security concerns from FARC activity and new criminal groups. A culture of vote-buying persists, and questionable campaign financing remains an issue. In response to these concerns, the GOC and local authorities are investigating complaints of fraud and corruption, providing protection to candidates, and preparing to monitor polling places. END SUMMARY.

NEW SPACE FOR PARTICIPATION

¶2. (U) Colonel Jorge Rodriguez, the Commander of the National Police (CNP) in Sucre, said the July 2005 demobilization of the Montes de Maria paramilitary bloc has created new political space in an area formerly plagued by violence, extortion and intimidation. As a result, newer, left-wing political parties such as the Polo Democratico Alternativo (PDA) are openly campaigning against the traditional parties and local elites that have long held power in the region. PDA's mayoral candidate in San Onofre, Adil Jose Melendez, said there is a dramatic difference from previous elections, in which the paramilitary-backed candidate was the only contender for political office. Today, San Onofre has five candidates running for mayor from various parties. Moreover, the number of mayoral candidates in Sucre rose from 77 in the 2003 local elections to 142 in the upcoming October elections.

¶3. (U) PDA and other smaller parties are exploiting the political opening created by demobilization as well as the arrest of many local elected officials for paramilitary ties. In Sucre, ex-Senators Jairo Merlano (U Party) and Alvaro "Gordo" Garcia (Colombia Democratica), and ex-Congresswoman

Muriel Benito Rebollo (Conservative) have been arrested, as well as four members of Sucre's departmental legislature. PDA's candidate for mayor of Sincelejo said voters are looking for viable alternatives to the corrupt, and in some cases, murderous, practices revealed by these arrests.

SECURITY CONCERNS REMAIN

¶4. (C) Conservative Party Senator for Sucre, Julio Manzur, said intimidation and threats no longer exist in his department, but PDA candidate Melendez said he campaigns under fear of reprisals from new criminal groups active in the area. Melendez said those new groups are trying to influence local elections, because the winners of mayoral races would have authority to enforce controls along a major narcotrafficking route. (Note: In Colombia, mayors also serve as the local police chief.) Jackeline Moguea, a victims' group leader, candidate for the San Onofre City Council, and recent participant in the International Visitors Program, also noted cases of intimidation by former paramilitaries working as campaigners.

CULTURE OF VOTE-BUYING, CORRUPTION PERSISTS

¶5. (C) Catholic Bishop Nel Beltran said extreme poverty in Sucre, coupled with a general lack of education about the democratic process, creates a culture in which people seek handouts from politicians. This has led candidates such as Edgar Benito Rebollo (Conservative party candidate for Mayor of San Onofre and brother of jailed former Deputy Muriel Benito Rebollo) to offer benefits like free beauty treatments

to women who register with his party. PDA candidate Melendez said his campaign does not have the funds to compete with his wealthy opponents from traditional parties, who publicly hand out food, money and other goods. Melendez said he must conduct his campaign on foot, as he does not have funds for a car. His aim was to convince people they should vote for candidates based on their political platforms, rather than their pocketbooks.

EX-OFFICIALS EXERT INFLUENCE FROM JAIL

¶6. (C) Questions also remain about the financing of some local campaigns. A September 9 article in Colombia's leading daily newspaper reported several candidates in Sucre are receiving political and financial support from former officials who have been jailed because of alleged links to former paramilitaries. Juan David Diaz, victims' group leader and son of the mayor of El Roble who was murdered by paramilitaries, said these jailed officials continue to control the local governmental machinery, as well as the local offices of national GOC agencies such as the Prosecutor General's Office and Family Welfare. Diaz said the jailed officials are hand-picking successors and employing intimidation tactics to ensure their win.

¶7. (C) Bishop Beltran said it is common knowledge in the department that U party candidate for Governor, Jorge Carlos Barraza, receives political and financial support from jailed former Senators Garcia and Merlano. Juan Carlos Montes, a campaign manager for PDA's candidate for Governor, Lucy Urzola, said Barraza also benefits from support from jailed former Congresswoman Muriel Benito Rebollo. He also charged that Barraza's campaign is funded largely by Enilce "la Gata" Lopez, who was arrested for funding paramilitary groups in exchange for their help in maintaining her monopoly on the lottery market in the department. Barraza admitted to meeting with the jailed officials, claiming it was his "Christian duty" to visit those in prison, and telling us he went there to offer legal advice to his friends.

GOC TAKES STEPS TO ENSURE FAIR ELECTIONS

18. (U) Sucre's CNP Commander Rodriguez said the police collaborate with local military forces to provide security for political candidates. To ensure unbiased enforcement of voting procedures, the National Registrar has re-assigned local registrars from their home departments to posts in other departments. For example, Sucre's registrar for the October elections, Luigin Barrera, comes from Huila Department. These newly arrived registrars are training election workers to be vigilant against voting fraud. The poll workers will be checking records to ensure each person votes only in his or her designated district. To prevent voters from taking photos of ballots to receive payments, the registrars will require all cell phones be turned off before entering the voting booth.

19. (U) The National Elections Commission (CNE) has also assigned three special magistrates to Sucre to analyze the financial records of all political campaigns. This new investigative unit, created on August 28, will issue monthly reports of their findings and investigate charges of illicit funding and over-spending in political campaigns. The three magistrates recently assigned to Sucre said it may be difficult to reach any conclusions prior to the October 28 elections, but they will report any evidence of wrongdoing to the CNE in Bogota to ensure transparency and accountability in the campaign process.
Brownfield